

Still There for You?: Why Millennials Still Love Generation X's *Friends*

Kristin Fitzsimmons
Sarah Smith-Frigerio

This 2016-2017 study utilized focus groups of 18-24 year-old Friends viewers to understand the role that the show continues to play in their lives. Respondents described choosing to watch Friends because of its convenient availability and its content and characters being relatable. They approached the television show as a familiar comfort. There was a nostalgic longing for the era of Friends in terms of its portrayal of less mediated communication. This study draws from previous work on nostalgia and post-object fandom to illustrate how young and new audiences interact with entertainment media that is no longer in production.

Introduction

Friends premiered in 1994 to 21.5 million viewers. During each of its ten seasons, it ranked as one of the top ten most-watched programs on television. Its last episode aired on May 6, 2004 to 52.46 million viewers (“*Friends* Nielsen Ratings Archive,” 2004). Since then, *Friends* has been a mainstay in syndication, and currently plays on the cable channels TBS and Nickelodeon. On January 1, 2015, *Friends* became available on Netflix, and was renewed to remain on the streaming platform through the end of 2019 (Spangler, 2018). Netflix does not release viewing data, so it is difficult to ascertain the show’s popularity via streaming, which is crucial to understanding *Friends*’ overall viewership in an age where about 56% of people aged 19 to 25 watch TV and movies through streaming services rather than live television (Deloitte, 2016). Yet there is no doubt that *Friends* has staying power. Its Facebook page has over 20 million likes as of November 2019. Talk of a reunion show or special, often dismissed by *Friends*’ cast and producers, remained highly anticipated by fans. In November 2019, rumors of a reunion show in the works for the forthcoming subscription video-on-demand service HBO Max started to pop up (Goldberg, 2019; Nahas, 2019). A popular meme used to engage with someone on the dating app Tinder is Joey’s famous pick-up line: “How you doin’?” (DTR, 2016). This study emerged from a cultural curiosity about the continuing popularity of *Friends* (Davies, 2013; Sternbergh, 2016) and adds to research about the phenomena of post-object fandom (Williams, 2011) and nostalgia by examining new audiences for a “dormant” fan object, or one that is no longer in production (Williams, 2011, p. 269).

Our overarching research question concerns the self-reported reasons that *Friends* remains popular with young Millennials.¹ We approached the research question and conducted focus groups with an open, grounded approach. We found that nostalgia, as described by Boym (2002) played a major role in *Friends* viewing for the young adults who participated in our study. In this paper, we argue that the affinity Millennials have for *Friends* is induced by a nostalgia for times past and is linked to a desire for emotional connections that may not be available in contemporary life. This is supported by two major themes found in our focus groups: familiarity and nostalgia. Before describing our findings in depth, we first describe the show *Friends* through the generational lenses of Generation X and Millennials and situate the study in the context of post-object fandom and nostalgia. In the conclusion, we discuss the implications of younger generations viewing dormant fan objects, as well as how this study contributes to the growing literature on post-object fandoms and nostalgia.

¹ Aged 18-24 years old at the time we conducted focus groups in 2016-2017.

***Friends* and Generational Differences**

Generation X and *Friends*

Generation X is loosely defined as the generation after Baby Boomers, born during the 1960s to the early 1980s (Miller, 2011). When *Friends* debuted in 1994, it portrayed six men and women who were members of Generation X. Like many television shows of its era, *Friends* was about a group of urban singles. In shows like *Friends*, *Seinfeld*, and *Living Single*, nuclear families were only occasionally seen, and friends were the new family (Owen, 1997). Jarvis and Burr (2005) stated that the growing visibility of “alternative families” called attention to the shifting notion of family structure in contemporary Western society which includes single parents, stepfamilies, and gay and lesbian parents (p. 269).

Sandell (1998) argued that the alternative family depicted in *Friends* is structured by whiteness and relies on the “exclusion of racial and ethnic others” (p. 143). Indeed, the main characters in *Friends* are six, young, heterosexual, white friends living in New York, navigating romantic and platonic relationships through situational comedy. Relationships with people outside of the six friends are typically short lived and cause for conflict. Chidester (2008) asserted that the absence of any discussion about race in *Friends* reinforces whiteness as the “expected, rational point of view” (p. 170). As we will discuss in the findings and conclusion, this absence may explain why many respondents in our study expressed that they had never considered questioning the homogeneity of the cast when they were younger.

Friends was typical of sitcoms of the time. It included a live studio audience and multi-camera format, and plots often involved the annoying neighbor subplot, catchphrases, and over the top weddings (Santino, 2015). The use of stereotypes was common in the Generation X sitcom and became a kind of parasocial Myers-Briggs test for television viewers who were encouraged to identify themselves in a character. Each friend gave viewers a reason to laugh at him or her: Monica is obsessively neat, Ross is neurotic, Joey is a meathead, Rachel is flaky, Phoebe is a neo-hippie, and Chandler is biting sarcasm. In Owen’s (1997) interviews with self-identified Gen Xers, respondents felt an affinity for television shows either because they identified with a character’s situation or because a show functioned as an escape or way to zone out.

For example, when discussing *Beverly Hills, 90210* (1990-2000), one college student reported liking the show because the characters were also in college and she found the plots interesting (Owen, 1997). Yet another respondent described *90210* as “a comfort show, totally unrealistic, but you want to escape to their problems that seem so minor compared to your own” (Owen, 1997, p. 79). These were responses about television shows in production during the mid-to-late 90s, but they overlap with how Millennials talked about *Friends* in 2016-2017.

Millennials and *Friends*

According to Fry (2015), a researcher at Pew, the Millennial generation (born roughly 1981-1997) currently makes up the largest portion of the U.S. working population. Compared to previous generations, Millennials are more racially diverse, more optimistic about the future, and have more liberal views on social issues like same-sex marriage, interracial relationships, and marijuana legalization (Pew, 2018). This portrait of Millennials explains why some bloggers and media scholars have been perplexed about *Friends*’ continued popularity when *Friends* no longer appears progressive. Gen X writers are amazed and confounded that a younger generation, who as a whole have been more vocal about issues of diversity and representation in media, love a show whose cast is so homogenous and whose plot never directly addressed larger social issues (Behn, 2014; Sternbergh, 2015). *Friends* has been criticized for failing to show New York’s diversity with no main characters of color, its homophobic and transphobic jokes, and the inexplicable ability for single, middle class characters to live in enormous New York City apartments (see Behn, 2014; Sandell, 1998; Todd, 2011).

Millennial writers and those who interviewed Millennials offered their own explanations for *Friends*’ continued popularity, among them the idea that *Friends* represents a young adulthood unencumbered by quick access to the internet, smartphones, and dating apps (Entenman, 2016; Mangan,

2016). Another explanation is that *Friends* is real, but not too real when compared to newer shows that respondents mentioned such as *Girls* (2012-2017) and *Master of None* (2015-2017), which don't allow for the same kind of escape that a sitcom does (Sternbergh, 2016). While these explanations certainly emerge in our findings, to more fully understand why Millennials are drawn to *Friends*, it is important to describe the concept of post-object fandom.

Post-Object Fandom

Post-object fandom (Williams, 2011) is a useful starting point for situating *Friends* in contemporary life and the continued affinity that intergenerational viewers have for *Friends*. Post-object fandom refers to the period of fandom for a series or media text that is no longer in production. In the case of television shows, post-object fandom begins after the last episode of a show has been released without plans to produce new episodes. Participation in post-object fandom is represented in various ways including watching reruns, DVDs or streaming television, continuing conversations about television through message boards, attending conventions, and creative acts such as fan fiction, artwork, and videos. Studies of post-object fandom have tended to focus either on the death/dying of the object (Harrington, 2013; Mittell, 2015) or on how fans deal with the afterlife of a show in various forms (Todd, 2011). Mittell (2015) categorized endings of television shows based on their concluded-ness. The "most concluded" a show can be, as *Friends* was, is to have a fully planned finale with "going away party" (Mittell, 2015, p. 322). This offers fans the most closure because it allows them to say good-bye. However, a show's death does not guarantee that it will stay dead. Recent resurrections of fellow 1990s and 2000s American television programs such as *X-Files*, *Will & Grace*, *Gilmore Girls*, and *Full[er] House* indicate that a finale is not always the final goodbye.

Literature on post-object fandom has primarily concerned fans who were old enough to experience and understand the power of the finale first-hand and fans who have a high level of engagement on, for example, internet message boards (Williams, 2011) or via objects of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), such as fan fiction. Recently, there has been a growing interest in intergenerational fandom for what Pinkerton (2016) terms "re-quals," or the reappearance of new episodes for franchises that tap into nostalgia while also attempting to gain new audiences. A recent example comes from Hills's (2018) study of the revival of David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*. While our project is focused on a dormant fan object, it is not concerned with the circumstances of the death or dying process of *Friends*. Nor is our study focused on any efforts to reboot or resurrect a media object. Instead, its locus is *Friends*' robust afterlife as an intergenerational cultural object and how nostalgia might explain some of the responses to *Friends* from young adults.

Nostalgia and Media

Nostalgia is traditionally described as a longing for a real or imaginary home (Boym, 2002). Natterer (2014) differentiates between *historical nostalgia* and *personal nostalgia*. Whereas historical nostalgia involves positive affect about a time before one was born, personal nostalgia is positive affect induced by media that reminds one of their own past or memories. In the case of the respondents for our study, expressions of personal nostalgia were far more common. As the gulf between the age of new fans and *Friends*' original run grows, there may be a growing need to study the historical nostalgia of *Friends*. Writing about nostalgia as a coping mechanism, Menke (2017) defined *media nostalgia* as "nostalgia toward media," while *mediated nostalgia* exists where "media serve only as mediators or portals to media-unrelated experiences from the past" (p. 630). Following this definition, our respondents expressed both media and mediated nostalgia.

In contemporary television, nostalgia has been studied through such lenses as changes in viewing practices (Piper, 2011), escapism from new technologies and contemporary social issues (Bevan, 2013) and the production of new television shows that tap into prefeminist nostalgia such as *Mad Men* (Niemeyer & Wentz, 2014). Nostalgia is most often associated with objects from the past or a "superimposition of two images—of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life" (Boym, 2002). As will be discussed in the conclusion of this study, we were able to both draw from

Boym's (2002) conceptualization of nostalgia and to advance this construct in terms of nostalgia involving: familiarity, relatability, and an acceptable level of datedness, particularly as it pertains to the reasons why Millennials are drawn to watching *Friends*. First, it is prudent to describe our approach to the focus groups and data analysis, as well as the appropriateness of focus groups in answering why *Friends* remains popular viewing for young Millennials.

Given the literature on nostalgia and post-object fandom, we propose the following research question:

RQ: What meanings/understandings associated with the post-object viewing of *Friends* allows the show to remain so popular with Millennial viewers, and how does this relate to nostalgia?

Methodology

Tracy (2013) stated that focus groups are appropriate when stimulating similar “memories, experiences, and ideas” among respondents is desired (p. 167). Because the object of study was a generational and social response (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996) to *Friends*, data was collected by using 11 focus groups of 2-6 people each for a total of 37 respondents. While some of these focus groups were small in size, there were no substantial differences in responses between groups. In fact, Morgan (2017) and Morgan and Hoffman (2018) have argued that dyadic or small group interviews can yield the same data-rich interactions as larger focus groups. After the appropriate IRB approval was received, the first wave of recruitment was done through Communication courses at a large Midwestern university and respondents were compensated for their time with extra credit. The second wave of recruitment was done through snowball sampling and respondents were compensated for their time with \$15 Amazon electronic gift cards. In-person focus groups took place in a university focus group room and long-distance focus groups were conducted using Google Hangouts video chat. All focus groups lasted approximately 40-60 minutes and were audio recorded for the purpose of transcription.

Respondents were asked semi-structured questions regarding when and why they started watching *Friends*, what they liked about it, and how it compared to contemporary television they were watching in terms of structure and content. Because the goal was to understand emerging adults' responses to *Friends*, all respondents were between the ages of 18 and 24 (mean = 20.1) at the time of data collection. These young adults would have been between the ages of 6 and 12 at the time the *Friends* finale aired, meaning that as children and young adults, they had primarily watched with family, watched the show in syndication, and/or watched in streaming online. This group of respondents was quite homogenous, with most identifying as female ($N = 32$) and white ($N = 32$). While the particular demographic of interest was age, the fact that many of the groups were predominantly women—or in some cases completely women—may have affected the responses and group dynamics.

Emergent codes were noted and refined by the first author. Transcripts were then coded by the first and second authors using these codes. In this final version of coding, the following codes were applied: familiarity, with its subthemes of relaxation and relatability and nostalgia with its subthemes of longing and acknowledgement of change. In the sections that follow, we explicate these findings as they speak to our main research question regarding young adults' affinity for *Friends* and support these findings with quotations from respondents. All respondents' names have been replaced by pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. In the presentation of data, quotations grouped together thematically are followed by the respondent's name and age in parentheses. When respondents from a single focus group are in conversation with each other, quotations are presented in dialogue, with the respondent's pseudonym and age preceding their speech.

Results

Familiarity

In an article for *New York Times Magazine* reprinted on *Vulture*, Sternbergh (2016) interviewed several self-identified *Friends* fanatics in their early 20s and found several similarities between them. One was that they identified *Friends* as an escape or comfort. *Friends* was so comforting, in fact, that many of them said they fell asleep to the show (Sternbergh, 2016). Comfort, in our interpretation, is connected to the overarching theme of familiarity which involves *Friends*' omnipresence in respondents' lives, its light humor, and their ability to relate to characters, situations, and affective dimensions of the show.

“Always On.” When asked about their watching habits, many respondents said that they had first watched *Friends* in syndication on TBS or Nickelodeon. Even though all seasons of *Friends* were released on Netflix in 2015, some respondents continued to watch it on television. When we asked how they began to first watch *Friends*, they described it as being “always on.” *Friends* played throughout their childhoods and they continued to watch it via television, DVD, and most recently, on Netflix: “I started watching *Friends* in high school because when I would stay up late, that would be one of the things that was always on, so I started watching that and then I’ve been watching it every once and a while on Netflix, because I think it’s a very funny show” (Valerie, 21).

One reason *Friends* continues to be an omnipresent object of nostalgia is that it has never left the television screen since 1994 and continues to gain new audiences through its availability on Netflix. Watching *Friends* on Netflix may be a different experience without ads and with the added ability to binge watch at whim, but the culture of streaming has also been normalized. Those who watched *Friends* on television as children can now re-watch it on Netflix.

Another key part of *Friends*' familiarity is that many young adults were introduced to the show by an older family member or a peer:

I would just be watching TV or playing downstairs when I was younger. My grandma would be watching it on TV, so I would just kind of sit there and watch. So, I’ve always been familiar with it. And then last year, I roomed with a girl who was obsessed with it. So, that’s all she would literally watch. I would just sit there with her and laugh and that’s how I’m familiar with it. (Cassidy, 20)

I was probably in eighth grade or something, and I started watching it because my older sister used to watch it all the time, and she bought all the seasons on DVD and she’d watch it every day. And so, of course, since I’d be in her room all the time, I just ended up watching it too. And I got addicted to it. So now that it’s on Netflix, I’m like, ok. Cool. (Toni, 20)

In this way, *Friends* became part of the tableau of childhood for many respondents. Continued viewership was connected to family and friends who first introduced the show to respondents. The long-standing relationship respondents have with *Friends* explains how the show became a “go-to” to play in the background while completing other tasks and something that offered “mindless” relaxation.

Relaxation. There are two ways in which respondents described *Friends* as a tool used to relax. Its light humor and familiarity lent it a “background noise” quality. They also said that watching *Friends* does not require deep concentration; one can start at any episode. In comparison to contemporary shows of 2016-2017, respondents felt that *Friends* did not take on social issues, and this adds to its lightness. In their study on working class and middle class women in south London, Skeggs and Wood (2011) found that working class viewers watched more television and tended to use it more as background noise than middle class viewers, but that middle class viewers expressed more guilt and ascribed more power to the television itself. Students coming from a variety of income backgrounds used *Friends* as “background noise,” but the feeling of guilt and wasting time was not present in their responses. When asked about

how they typically watched *Friends*, two respondents answered: "I think it's one of those shows that's very easy to keep up with while you're multitasking. It's lighthearted. You don't have to pay that much attention to understand what's going on and still like it" (Linda, 20).

So, if I just want something in the background, I might pick *Friends* as a show that I watch. I don't usually sit down and be like, "I'm going to watch *Friends*." Like, I just sort of stumble upon it. At this point, I've seen the whole thing at least once, and I've seen certain seasons multiple times and I would probably just pick a good episode and have it on as I'm in and out doing stuff. (Sloane, 24)

In these responses, the television set as an object has lost its omnipotence and control, though specific television shows have the potential to be addictive. This could be the result of the increased use of streaming media. Platforms such as Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, and YouTube allow young adults to access desired media and to watch and rewatch at their leisure. Even though young adults can seek out and find what they want to watch when they want to watch it, they still used television as background noise, just as Skeggs and Wood's (2011) working-class women respondents did.

A quality that lends itself to "background noise" was what respondents described as the show's "lightness." According to them, *Friends* did not require much concentration to enjoy. This quality was mentioned most often when respondents were asked how *Friends* compared to more contemporary television shows:

It's, like, easy because after I watch anything that's scary and intense, I watch an episode of *Friends* afterwards. So, I just watched *13 Reasons Why*, and that's very heavy. And I needed some *Friends*. (Nikki, 23)

There's so much drama in reality TV, and I feel like *Friends* is very lighthearted and there's not really any drama. (Lilly, 18)

Friends was described as less intense than other television shows; it allowed viewers to relax and complete other tasks. Most episodes resolve conflict by their end, which may add to its comforting quality. One respondent shared a powerful story about the comforting nature of *Friends*:

My father passed away in April, and right after that happened, I started to rewatch *Friends*. And it kind of helped me through my grieving process and brought a little bit of humor back into my life. I would watch it basically every day up until now. And it kind of just reminded me that life moved on even though we go through difficult situations. (Kim, 22)

Friends' comforting qualities expand beyond its lightness as background noise; it also relates to the characters and situations portrayed in the show. *Friends*' uncomplicated content, episodic closure, and relatable characters and situations made it a ready and convenient source of comfort for the emerging adults in our focus groups.

Relatability. *The Brady Bunch*, a nostalgic Gen X favorite, fared better in terms of longevity than one of its contemporaries, *The Partridge Family*. Sherwood Schwartz, *The Brady Bunch*'s creator, argued that *The Brady Bunch*'s characters faced more relatable problems. *The Partridge Family* often directly addressed social issues of the 60s and 70s, causing it to become dated more quickly than *The Brady Bunch* (Owen, 1997). Like *The Brady Bunch*, *Friends* remains relatively undated because it did not touch directly on particular social issues of its day, giving it a "timeless" relatability for some of our respondents.

The fact that *Friends* left out important social issues of its day is also something that led us to pursue this research. As individuals on the cusp of Generation X who watched *Friends* during its original broadcast, we approached this project with questions about how *Friends* would speak to young Millennials. To our surprise, the focus groups overwhelmingly expressed that *Friends* remains popular because of its relatable situations and characters. The characters on *Friends* are young adults, but none are

college students. Nonetheless, respondents related to the general situation of being a young adult, which they described as “not knowing what to do,” experiencing romantic relationships, and building friendships:

Yeah, you can definitely relate to it more now in college. I mean, as a freshman, I know especially that you can relate to it now more than I could a year ago. Yeah, I see a lot of Rachel and her being independent for the first time as well. Just kind of in the setting that I’m in now. (Isaac, 18)

I guess, I feel like by the time I’m out of college, I need to have my life together. And I know that it’s just a TV show, but it’s nice to see that I don’t. That when I get there, I can still be figuring it out. And it makes you kind of see adults differently. That they’re still people and trying to figure it out. Because I understand that more now - that when I was younger, I was just watching it because it was funny. But now I get that aspect of it. That it’s ok if you don’t know what you’re doing. (Kaleigh, 18)

Respondents found *Friends* relatable because they were also newly independent, navigating new friendships and romantic relationships, and unsure of what life would be like post-college. These relatable problems, as well as a lack of specific social issues mentioned in the show, allowed respondents to enjoy *Friends* well after it became dormant.

In the case of our young adult respondents, *Friends* served as a nostalgic vehicle for those who grew up watching it, especially when they were introduced by an older family member. Furthermore, young adults called *Friends* “relatable,” a sentiment expressed when they identified with a character or situation in the show and/or found it affectively realistic. Respondents related to the general affective dimensions of a television show based on the relationships of six young adults, but is the 90s sitcom a truly “timeless” piece of television? We wondered how nostalgia would be expressed for a show that, as popular journalism has pointed out, displayed problematic views on sexuality and gender (Kaplan, 2018; Smith, 2018) and presented an unrealistic and homogenous portrait of New York City in terms of class (Bennett, 2015) and race (Baxter-Wright, 2017).

Nostalgia

In our previous section on familiarity and its subthemes of relaxation and relatability, respondents framed *Friends* as a lighthearted show that they related to on an affective level. They identified themselves in similar situations as the young adults portrayed on screen. In this section, we dig deeper into how young Millennials interpreted *Friends* as a show from the past that has relevance and offers entertainment in the present.

Respondents recognized that *Friends* is a sitcom from the 90s. When asked how *Friends* represented its time period, focus groups first brought up technology, fashion, and sitcom conventions which made *Friends* seem a bit “cheesy.” Two respondents in one focus group pondered the effect of the *Friends* set and a live audience:

Isaac, 18: Filmed in front of a live studio audience. *The Office* didn’t do that. They threw out the jokes and it was such dry humor, people were able to get it.

Collin, 19: Yeah, I think nowadays if I were to hear or watch a comedy with a laugh track, I would think it’s really cheesy. So, I don’t know, maybe we’ve just kind of drifted away from being spoofed and laugh lines just kind of...

Isaac, 18: Are we really laughing at the quality of the joke or are we laughing at the other people that are laughing?

Although at first, respondents thought of *Friends* as timeless, there were moments when they recognized the show as dated. In the discussion of structure and the presentation of humor in *Friends*,

what emerged was that respondents enjoyed the humor, but found that it was very much associated with the period in which *Friends* was filmed and didn't always believe that this format could be successfully repeated. Thus, the elements of nostalgia that emerged from our focus groups were:

- 1) The connection of *Friends* with childhood and becoming a young adult.
- 2) A longing for past socializing rituals, unmediated by smartphones and apps.
- 3) A sentiment that *Friends* comes from a "simpler" time when television was not as aware or self-conscious of social issues.

A connection to childhood. Because nostalgia is often conceptualized as a longing for something past, it is not surprising that young adults who had watched *Friends* as children connected it fondly with childhood. When asked if there were significant moments they related to *Friends*, some respondents framed *Friends* in terms of a crucial moment or time in their early lives:

One thing that did always strike me when I was growing up in middle school. I was raised in a really Christian household and everything that came with that. And so, I did notice - I was like, "Mom, why does every single relationship - why are they having sex on the first date? I don't get that." So, that opened weird conversation and weird doors, but like, I always did notice that. (Alice, 19)

I mean, it was like the 90s and early 2000s, so I feel like I was growing up and I was born '95, so then I would have been 5 years old when it came to the 2000s, so it was just growing up, going to middle school, going to elementary school, meeting friends, kind of becoming a person...with a personality. (Ellen, 21)

Friends became part of the self-narrative that young adults had about their childhoods. Although they did not express a sense of loss at the show's finale and thus felt no threat to ontological security described by Williams (2011), their inclusion of *Friends* in important self-narratives of growing up make them a unique audience to include in studies of post-object fandom.

Unmediated socialization. Respondents expressed a longing for the rituals of the "simpler time" portrayed in *Friends*, particularly when it came to relationships and communication. *Friends* creator Marta Kauffman said the show was more popular post-9/11 because of its optimism (Sternbergh, 2016). Entenman (2016) contended that *Friends* remained popular because it satisfied a longing for simple social connections unmediated by smartphones.

Respondents in this study expressed similar sentiments. First, they observed that everyday communication and socialization was different in *Friends*, mainly because of differences in technology: cell phones and laptops were primitive, online dating was not yet normalized, and hijinks ensued when answering machines were involved. When technology played a role in a *Friends* episode, it typically did so through humor. What stood out to respondents was the necessity of face-to-face communication. When asked how *Friends* would be different today, one respondent said: "Well, the kind of technology, I think, like, there'd be a lot more - there'd be computers and cell phones, and they'd be using those to come up with topics to talk to each other instead of actually [pause] talking" (Jennie, 18). This is particularly notable in focus groups when respondents discussed the differences between how dating rituals are portrayed in the show versus how they understood the contemporary culture of dating:

Lilly, 18: Well now I feel like if you're flirting with somebody, you favorite their Tweet or you like their Instagram picture, and then they put in the actual face effort, you know what I mean? It's just different.

Cassidy, 20: It's simpler to be like, oh I like her. Her Instagram pic was cute. You know? Rather than, they had a lot of one-on-one things. They had dates. I think I liked it back then more than now.

Moderator: What did you like about it? Or about the way they show it?

Cassidy, 20: I don't know. I just felt like it was more respectful. More one-on-one, in person type things.

Linda, 20: More genuine.

Respondents expressed these ideas with some amount of sadness, wishing that they could go back to the moment before highly mediated communication was the norm. Because the first cell phones with texting capabilities were released in the early 90s, and the iPhone first came out in 2007, when the oldest respondents were 13, it is likely they never experienced a dating culture unmediated by texting, social media and email.

While both men and women made observations about the differences in dating culture, focus groups that were entirely women expressed a longing for these rituals:

Toni, 20: I wanted to say like, dating-wise, I feel like it's different now. I know that my friends, they don't really go out on dates. It's more like hooking up type of thing. Back then, it was like....

Erica, 19: Yeah, it was more traditional. And now we have a thing. What does that mean? But there it's like, "I'm seeing you. Would you like to go get coffee?"

Moderator: So, in the show, there's a lot of asking people on dates, and you feel like that's different now.

Jane, 20: Yeah, sadly. I wish it was like...

Sidney, 20: I want their life.

Friends had a simple premise: friends who hang out and talk to one another. When you have a romantic interest in someone, you ask them out; when you break up with someone, you must look into their eyes, or at least speak into the phone. Without having ever experienced such a dating culture, respondents looked back on such unmediated dating interactions with nostalgia.

Lacking self-consciousness. *Friends* is a show which contemporary media scholars and popular writers have pointed out has problematic messages about sexuality and a lack of diversity (Chidester, 2008; Sandell, 1998). Asking questions about race, gender, and sexuality was difficult in focus groups because the show simply didn't address these issues in a very purposeful and self-conscious way. But when respondents were asked if *Friends* could be remade today, the issue of diversity was a clear point of distinction between 90s television and contemporary television: "It would definitely have to have like more actors of color, and like, not be as heteronormative. Like, there needs to be a little bit more diversity, and like not everybody is straight, and white and cis-gendered" (Mandy, 21).

Some respondents noticed these problematics, while others appeared to only recognize them when brought up in the focus group. One phrase that came up over and over again was that *Friends* didn't make diversity a "big deal," and this was connected to its quality of being laid back and lighthearted:

I don't really watch any other shows from the '90s, so I don't know if this is correct, but they had gay characters on there, and I feel like that's kind of a big thing that they never made a big deal about it. (Kaleigh, 18)

...Ross is dating Charlie, this professor, and she's a black woman. And I think I watched that and until this second, I didn't think about it...I think that people would comment on the fact now that they're like, oh cool, they have an interracial relationship, whereas then it wasn't a good or a bad thing, that's just how it was, so while there is conversation, I think it's - I feel like back then, it was more a blissful - it is what it is, ok. But now, we're starting to question it more and stuff. Which could have pros and cons. (Alice, 19)

Some respondents interpreted that diversity was simply not a priority in the production of *Friends*, as can be seen in the responses above. Other respondents, as will be described below, considered the presence of any diverse representation on *Friends* to be normatively better than TV shows that came before *Friends*.

The longing expressed in young adults' responses appeared as nostalgia for an era which some interpreted as being post-racial, in the sense that race existed, but that it was of "no consequence" (Squires, 2014, p. 18). Another respondent in the same focus group, Ronnie, commented:

I think it's pretty cool though because if you put the show in context with time period, I mean it goes from like, well, before the show, segregation, and it being like blacks/whites separated. That's it...It's like Ross dated...there's... [African-American actress] Gabrielle Union, she played the girl moving in one time. And Ross wanted to date her and Joey wanted to date her. And so, it's really lighthearted and then now when you look at it, people are sort of looking for that and looking for that diversity. Whereas before this show came out, it was like, yeah, that's not going to happen. (Ronnie, 18)

Other respondents noted the progression of being cognizant of diverse representations from the 1990s until the present, and rationalized the lack of diverse characters in that manner:

I think it gives me an idea of what the culture was like when the show came out. And the example of diversity - ok, we've come a long way that we can recognize that. It's still obviously not where it should be, but the fact that that's a conversation now that wasn't there then. I think that shows me a lot about where we've come since the show, but yeah, so [inaudible] I don't think it makes me hate the show because like nowadays that's something that should be in the show because we know about it...back then...because they were a little less educated or talked about it less. And I don't think it would make me not want to watch it, but it's just something that I keep in mind now. (Alice, 19)

I think it's just also become so much a bigger deal now than it was in, like, with people noticing it and stuff. And yeah, it was a big deal then, but I didn't think about that at all, but I've never heard anyone say that, but now that I'm thinking of all the characters in the show - even the side characters - there's not that many different than the main. (Jodi, 19)

In focus group conversations about race on *Friends*, respondents acknowledged that the show was predominantly white, but there was no agreement on what the presence or absence of a minority on the show meant. For some, the presence of a Black character whose Blackness was not explicitly discussed was a part of normalizing people of color on television. This was what specifically made *Friends* different from contemporary shows – that it could have a Black character without any discussion of race. This appeared to be tied to respondents' ideas about television during the *Friends* era. It is now "expected" that casting for a new television show will address diversity, but during the 90s, people simply weren't aware enough for this to be an expectation.

In our focus groups, we found that the theme of nostalgia as expressed by young Millennials was a longing for past rituals. As a feeling of loss, nostalgia was additionally conveyed as an acknowledgment of changes in society and in the production of television. Respondents' acknowledgment that *Friends* was a show set in the 1990s did not affect their enjoyment, and in fact, often offered relaxation or a break from the seriousness of contemporary shows. Many referred to *Friends* as light-hearted or said that it did not take itself too seriously. The understanding of *Friends* as a representation of 90s postracialism, sometimes spoken about with a nostalgic longing, is one of the more striking findings of this study and one which we would encourage scholars to pursue further in the fields of post-object fandom and younger generations' understanding of the past through media consumption.

Conclusion

This study emerged from a growing curiosity about the continued popularity of shows from Generation X, as illustrated by the resurgence of reboots and remakes (e.g., *X-Files*, *Full[er] House*, *Will & Grace*, *Gilmore Girls*, etc.) as well as the existence of a younger audience for television shows that are now over twenty years old. *Friends* has enjoyed a sustained popularity and was made more accessible to a younger generation since its appearance on Netflix. Embedded in this curiosity about why Millennials are drawn to *Friends* is a recognition that *Friends* has drawn strong critiques about its unrealistic depiction of New York City in terms of race and class as well as containing frequent homophobic and transphobic jokes. Before beginning the focus groups, we believed these critiques would be obvious to respondents, but that they would dismiss the critiques as products of the time in which *Friends* is situated. This did not appear to be the case and demonstrates one important strength in interpretive empirical work. Although quantitative data on the demographics of viewership is limited, a clearer picture of *Friends*'—and other shows from the 1990s and early 2000s—current fan base can be conceived through qualitative research projects that focus on young audiences' affinity for television no longer in production.

Our findings showed that feelings of nostalgia required a television show to have some amount of familiarity and relatability. While respondents expressed an affinity for the “simpler time” that *Friends* portrayed, they also related to characters and situations in the show. They articulated that the show was a comfort in its simplicity, and whatever drama began was wrapped up by the end of most episodes. Many respondents said that they had never considered how homogenous the main cast was or that if they had, they felt this was normal for a 90s social group or that it was not an intentional move by the producers and writers. Nonetheless, when comparing *Friends* to contemporary comedies, respondents noted that *Friends*' production style is dated, and that if a similar show were remade today, it would have to include a more diverse cast to satiate a public that increasingly demands diverse representations on television. Respondents described experiences of both media and mediated nostalgia, as defined by Menke (2017). Drawing from this and also Boym's (2002) understanding of nostalgia, we posit a conceptualization of nostalgia in TV viewing in the following, nested, ways:

- (1) Nostalgia involves an element of familiarity or being “at home.” This is represented in the convenient availability of *Friends* and the comfort that the show offers young adults in times of distress or transition.
- (2) The characters, settings, and stories must be relatable and realistic. Although nostalgia involves an element of fantasy, if the gap between fantasy and reality is relatively small, fans will make the leap to relate what is portrayed onscreen to their own lives. In the case of young adult viewers of *Friends*, their interpretation of what is relatable and realistic is often triggered by its comparison to contemporary television, especially the genre of reality TV.
- (3) Finally, nostalgia in television viewing recognizes an element of datedness. Young adults' affinity for the show is influenced by their acknowledgement that *Friends* is a product of its time. Indeed, this datedness is, in part, why they like it. It portrays, in their words, a simpler time. This datedness can also conflict with the realness of a television show.

Further research on nostalgia as it relates to television viewing could be applied to other television shows of the 1990s and 2000s. In particular, *Seinfeld* and *Frasier* were two other '90s shows that some respondents were watching. How might the attraction to these shows be similar to or different than the attraction to *Friends*? How does the influx of remakes originating in the 1990s and 2000s affect nostalgia in those who did or did not watch the original series? How might shows produced later, but still readily available through syndication and/or streaming services, such as *The Office* and *Parks and Recreation*, invoke a sense of nostalgia in post-object viewers, given that these shows do somewhat more to address social issues? These are only a few of the questions we believe future research on nostalgia in television can address. We believe nostalgia will begin to play a greater role in the research of post-object fandom,

which originally focused on fans coping with the ending of a show's production rather than a new generation of audiences for an already dormant media object.

The findings presented here paint a small but substantial picture of how emerging adults aged 18-24 interpreted *Friends* and why the show remains popular with this age group, a question that many have raised in popular media. The findings show that this age group enjoys *Friends* both as a clear product of its time and as something that continues to be relevant in the present. When emerging adults talked about *Friends* with a longing for a past never experienced, they did not do so in terms of turning back time. In other words, though they longed for unmediated communication, they did not state that they would change their own communication habits. They enjoyed watching *Friends* specifically because it projected a moment connected to the simplicity of childhood and a cultural past that could never actually be experienced, only relived vicariously through watching *Friends*.

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